

E-Mails to Congress on the Rise

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Have you ever e-mailed a member of Congress? The odds are increasingly good that you have, according to a new study by the Congressional Management Foundation that found "almost half of adult Americans" -- roughly 100 million -- "contacted Congress in the last five years to support, oppose or learn more about issues of interest to them."

CMF, a nonpartisan, nonprofit group that advocates for a more effective and efficient Congress, has been studying communication between citizens and lawmakers for several years. For its latest report, CMF did telephone surveys of thousands of citizens and also conducted focus groups with hundreds of House and Senate aides.

The study is chock full of charts and graphs documenting how Americans get their information about Congress and which types of citizens do and don't attempt to contact lawmakers. The report concluded that "the Internet has become the primary source for learning about and communicating with Congress;" that a majority of people who contacted Congress did so at the urging of a "third-party," usually an "interest group;" and that a large portion of citizens who contacted lawmakers were not satisfied with the response they received.

The report offers a number of suggestions for congressional offices, suggesting that most need to improve their online presence, that they should rethink the way they deal with constituent communications and that they need more staff and resources to deal with the increased workload. There is plenty more information worth gleaning from the study, but the primary conclusion is that the growth of the Internet has created something of a paradox: Even as citizens have more information available to them and more ways to contact lawmakers, they feel increasingly disconnected from Congress and complain that lawmakers don't seem to care about their concerns.